

## 3Qs: In 'free culture' online, where are the women?

March 26 2013, by Matt Collette

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Joseph Reagle, an assistant professor of communication studies, explains why women make up a very small percentage of “open computing” fields like Wikipedia, Linux, and Apache. Credit: Northeastern file photo

Though women make up only about 27 percent of the computing community, they are even more underrepresented in the "free culture" movement, which comprises users and developers of websites like Wikipedia and the Linux operating system. In "Free As In Sexist?," a paper published earlier this year, assistant professor of communication

studies Joseph Reagle explained why.

## **What are the consequences of alienating women in online communities?**

I've been a part of these communities for a long time and it's become quite apparent that there aren't a lot of women present. I suggest that the same things that are drawing so many people into the field of free culture—[openness](#), freedom, and geekiness—are actually keeping women from being involved in free culture groups.

If this is a problem, and I think that it is, it's one that tends to self-perpetuate. Now we have something like a lower quality [Wikipedia](#), because interested people aren't getting involved to make their own contributions, and that furthers a community that may not be all that friendly to women.

## **What is it about the field of computing culture that is so alienating to women?**

The geek identity itself can be kind of alienating, and that's not something that all women want to be involved in. So that alone may be keeping women from becoming involved in these kinds of communities.

When I give talks about this topic, I bring up Comic Book Guy from The Simpsons, who is a character who goes on the Internet and is argumentative, pointy-headed, and nerdy. A lot of people, both [men and women](#), say they have a lot they want to contribute, but they don't want to argue with someone for 48 hours about a change they suggest. So that, which is pretty widespread online, turns a lot of people off.

Studies in the 1970s looked at feminist collectives, where groups of

women opted to live in groups that weren't supposed to have any hierarchy or structure, which is similar to how the open computing community is structured. But that research found that these groups still developed structures of hierarchy, and in this case, they were often even more corruptive and unaccountable. Now you have one jerk, one bad apple, who can alienate whole groups of people who have no real recourse. And that raises this question: Are you even being open?

In a famous 1970 essay, Jo Freeman noted how feminist collectives that had opted to do away with formal hierarchy instead gave rise to a "tyranny of structurelessness" where the informal cliques that emerged were not even accountable. Similarly, a group that is supposedly open and allows a jerk (or toxic person) is not really open. It's alienating to other people.

## **How can that idea of openness hold back online communities?**

A lot of people who started the free and open culture movements equate the Internet with a libertarian, anarchist ethic. The Internet, they think, is a free speech zone where you can scream and shout as much as needed; eventually, truth will out and the last person standing wins the argument. Anyone who says you need to calm down or chill out, in this mindset, would be equated with censorship. But there have to be ways of looking at Internet freedom as being more than just this maximalist ethos where you can say anything you want as loud as you want to, especially if you want to create an environment where more people are involved.

When you talk to women, they say they tried to participate but they experienced a lot of sexism, even if it was from a minority of the people there. So there is a real interest in being involved; we've now got to find a way to keep [women](#) from being pushed away.

Provided by Northeastern University

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